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ABSTRACT

Data from the longitudinal Berkeley Becoming a Family Project were used to evaluate the possibility that husbands' and wives' working models of attachment are related to the quality of their marital relationship. The main issue investigated was that of whether there are connections between working models of childhood attachment relationships and the quality of intimate couple relationships. A total of 27 couples were assessed by means of Main's Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), which consists of questions about childhood attachment experiences, and two Self-Report Measures of Relationship Satisfaction, one dealing with marital satisfaction and the other with satisfaction with the couple's communication. Couples were observed with their preschool children in a laboratory family interaction situation. Results revealed that AAI classifications were associated with observations of couple interaction but not with self-reports of relationship satisfaction. Also, men rated as insecure on the AAI were more likely to be part of couples who engaged in conflictual and less positive interactions than were men rated as secure. Women did not exhibit the same tendencies. Insecure women with insecure husbands were more likely to be in couples in which there was more observed conflict and less postive interactions than were insecure women with secure husbands. Included are 11 references and 2 figures. (SAK)

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Working Models of Childhood Attachment and Marital Relationships

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Working Models of Attachment and Marital Relationships

Attachment theory would suggest some continuity between important childhood relationships in childhood and adulthood (Bowlby, 1988; Ricks, 1985). By the end of the first year of life, infants are thought to form working models of themselves and of others as a result of their history of interactions with important attachment figures. Once formed, these working models influence expectations and behavior in situations which elicit attachment behaviors. Thus, for adults working models can be seen as a kind of "blueprint" for both parent-child and couple attachment relationships.

There is an emerging literature documenting connections between adults' working models of childhood attachment relationships using Mary Main's Adult Attachment Interview (Main and Goldwyn, in press) and the quality of parent-child relationships in infancy (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, in press; Ward, 1990) and early childhood (Cohn, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1991; Crowell & Feldman, 1988). Adults who are able to provide balanced, coherent accounts of their childhood experiences (i.e. who are thought to have secure/autonomous working models) are more sensitive and responsive parents than are adults whose descriptions reflect either a preoccupation with or dismissing stance toward attachment (i.e. whose models are insecure. Thus, we have some evidence for intergenerational continuities in parent-child relationships.

At the same time, evidence from a second line of research has shown that adults' working models of intimate <u>adult relationships</u> are linked both to their experience of romantic love and to their behavior in romantic relationships. For example, Shaver and his colleagues have found that as compared to people who either find it hard to develop close relationships or

who are too "clingy" with romantic partners, those who find it relatively easy to get close to others (i.e. the secure group) are less frustrated with previous partners and feel their current partners are trustworthy and dependable (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

An important question that remains to be addressed, however, is whether connections exist between working models of childhood attachment relationships and the quality of intimate couple relationships. In this presentation, using data from the Berkeley Becoming a Family Project, we consider whether husbands' and wives' working models of attachment as assessed using Main's Adult Attachment Interview are related to the quality of their marital relationsip. We will present data relevant to two questions: 1) Is there an association between husbands' and wives' Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) classifications and relationship satisfaction and observed couple behavior? 2) Are couples joint AAI classifications associated with relationship satisfaction and couple behavior?

METHOD

Sample

The sample consisted of 27 couples who were part of a longitudinal study on the transition to parenthood (see Cowan & Cowan, 1990, for details) The data that we will be discussing today were collected when the children were in preschool. The couples were ethnically diverse but were generally well-educated (almost half of the participants had some graduate or professional education). The participants ranged in age from 26- 42 years (mean age for wives = 32 years; mean age for husbands = 35 years).

Measures

Assessment of Working Models of Attachment. Working models of attachment were assesed using Main's Adult Attachment Interview (AAI). The interview takes approximately 1 hour and consists of questions about childhood attachment experiences. Main's coding system yields ratings on a number of dimensions of childhood experience but most relevant for our discussion today is the classificatory rating based on the entire interview transcript. Main has described four patterns of attachment which are: secure/autonomous and 3 insecure patterns: dismissing, preoccupied, and disorganized. Main and others have reported that these AAI classifications are related to attachment classifications both at infancy (Fonagy et al., in press; Ward, 1990) and at at 6 years of age (Main and Goldwyn, in press). Because of limitations in our sample size, we combined the three insecure patterns and compared the secure and insecure groups.

Quality of the Marital Relationship

Self-Report Measures of Relationship Satisfaction. The quality of the couple relationship was assessed using two self-report measures of relationship satisfaction: 1. **Marital satisfaction** was assessed by the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test; 2. **Satisfaction with couple communication** in specific domains such as closeness and distance, amount of conflict and disagreement, sharing feelings, and problem solving was assessed using a measure designed for the present study. A total satisfaction score ($\alpha_{husbands} = .91$; $\alpha_{wives} = .92$) was computed.

Observational Ratings of Couple Interaction. Couples were observed in a laboratory family interaction situation. Both parents and their preschool child were asked to work on structured (i.e. building a

model of a train) as well as an unstructured (i.e. building a world in the sand) tasks. Husbands' and wives' behavior were rated separately but proved to be highly correlated (mean r was .92). Thus, the ratings were combined to create a composite measure of couple interaction. Factor analyses of these behavioral ratings yielded two factors, one for conflict (i.e. disagreement, anger, displeasure, competition) and the other for positive interaction (i.e. pleasure, responsiveness, warmth and interactive). Together, these two factors accounted for 71% of the variance.

RESULTS

Couple Relationships and Husbands' and Wives' AAI Classifications

Relationship Satisfaction Results showed that AAI classification was not associated with self-reports of marital satisfaction and couple communication for either husbands or wives.

Couple Interaction While the means were in the predicted direction, results showed no differences in observed couple conflict or positive interaction for wives. However, significant differences emerged for husbands. As can be seen in Figure 1, couples in which the husband was rated secure on the AAI displayed less conflict and more positive interaction than did couples where the husband was rated insecure F [2,22] = 11.08, $p < .001$

Insert Figure 1 Here

In sum, for both husbands and wives no differences emerged on self-reports of relationship satisfaction. Observations of couple interactions revealed differences for husbands but not for wives. In an attempt to try

to explain this finding, we wondered whether women's feelings and behavior with their spouse might be influenced by her husbands' AAI classification.

Couple Relationships and Couple AAI Classifications

Before creating the couple classificatory groups, we looked at the the concordance between husbands' and wives' AAI classifications and found no association. This finding is consistent with that reported by Shaver and his colleagues, Collins & Read, 1990 and others who have studied dating couples. We also found that there were only 2 couples in which the husband was insecure and the wife secure, so we decided to remove them from the analyses. So, the results that I will present will consider 3 couple classificatory groups: insecure-insecure, woman/insecure- man/secure, secure-secure.

Relationship Satisfaction and Couple Interaction. Again, no differences emerged for women's marital satisfaction or their satisfaction with couple communication. However, striking differences emerged when we look at observations of couple conflict and positive interaction. As can be seen in Figure 2, couples in which both members were classified as insecure showed markedly more conflict and less positive interaction than did those in which the woman was insecure and the man secure or both members of the couple were secure F [2,19] = 7.88, $p < .003$.

Insert Figure 2 Here

Follow-up comparisons revealed significant differences between the insecure-insecure and insecure-secure groups but not between the insecure-secure and secure-secure groups. These findings suggest that the presence

of a secure partner may have an ameliorative effect on the quality of the couple relationship.

DISCUSSION

To summarize, there were 3 major findings:

1) AAI classifications were associated with observations of couple interaction but not with self-reports of relationship satisfaction. This finding is consistent with Kobak and Sceery's finding that peer reports of personality were more strongly associated with AAI classifications in college students than were self-reports (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). One possible explanation for this finding is that AAI classifications represent the coherence and organization of attachment related thoughts and feelings not merely a retrospective report of childhood experience. As such, it is possible to describe rejecting childhood experiences in a coherent and thoughtful way and be rated as secure. What is important is how realistic and balanced the persons' account seems to be, not whether the experiences were positive or negative. Thus, it is conceivable that people classified as insecure (especially those in the dismissing group) are more likely to need to present their experiences in a favorable light and as such may give overly positive responses on self-report measures. In this case, behavioral observations become particularly informative.

2) Men rated as insecure on the AAI were more likely to be in couples who engaged in conflictual and less positive interactions than were those rated as secure. Similar differences were not found for women.

3) For women, it became important to look at her classification in conjunction with her husbands. Results showed that women classified as insecure whose husbands were also insecure were more likely to be couples

where there was more observed conflict and less positive interaction than were women who were insecure whose husbands were secure. In fact, the couple interactions of women in the insecure-secure group did not differ statistically from those in which both people were rated secure. Here I should add that we have found a similar pattern of results for mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior. Mothers classified as insecure on the AAI engaged in more supportive and constructive parenting behaviors when their husbands were rated secure than did insecure mothers whose husbands were also rated as insecure (Cohn et al., 1991).

These findings tentatively suggest that the connections between childhood experience and couple relationships may be more direct for men whereas for women, they are mediated by the husbands' working model of attachment relationships. The results that I presented today would suggest that men whose working models of childhood attachment relationships are secure are supportive with their wives which in turn may make it easier for their wives to reciprocate in a positive way. On the other hand, when both members of the couple are rated insecure, they may be more likely to engage in the kinds of conflictual, negatively escalating cycles that are characteristic of distressed couples. Perhaps, the presence of one secure partner makes it less likely the couple will become involved in escalating conflictual interchanges.

The finding that couples in the insecure-secure group looked so similar to those in the secure group suggests that other variables may be important in trying to explain connections between working models of childhood attachment experiences and couple relationships. The work of Shaver and others has shown that working models of <u>adult</u> attachment relationships are

linked with experiences in romantic relationships. However, little is known about how working models of childhood attachment experiences are linked with working models of adult attachment. Main, Bowlby and others have suggested that working models of attachment become more differentiated with age. Thus, it is conceivable that women in the insecure-secure group, had insecure models of childhood attachment relationships but secure models of adult attachment relationships whereas women in the insecure-insecure group has insecure models of both kinds of relationships. A useful direction for future research on couple relationships would be to look at connections between working models of childhood and adult attachment relationships.

To conclude, despite our modest sample size, the results presented today show impressive connections between working models of childhood attachment relationships and observational ratings of couple interactions. Overall, however, adults' developmental histories seem to have more of an influence on how people act with their spouses than on what they say about them.

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Figure 1

Couple Positive Interaction and Conflict as a function of Husbands' AAI Classification

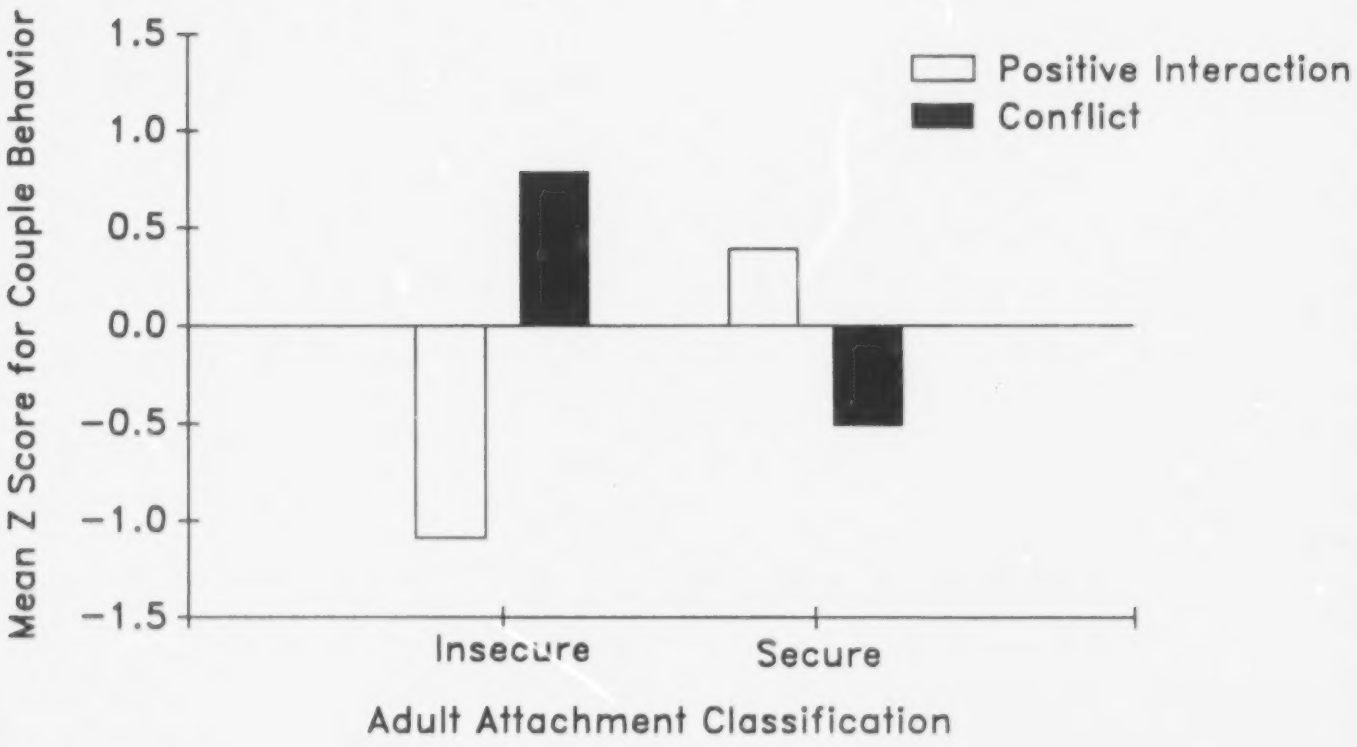
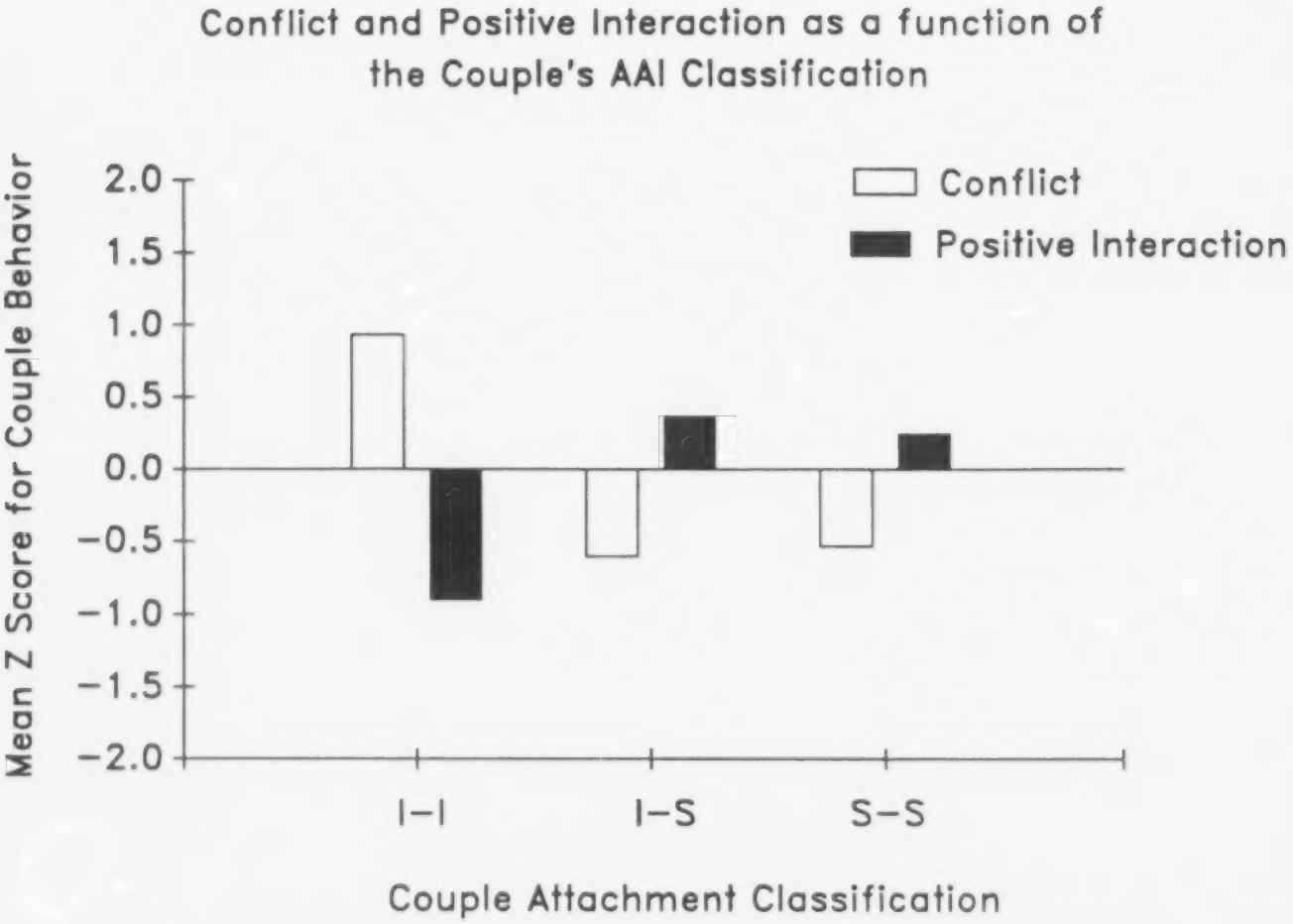


Figure 2


Conflict and Positive Interaction as a function of the Couple's AAI Classification
Mean Z Score for Couple Behavior
2.0
1.5
1.0
0.5
0.0
−0.5
−1.0
−1.5
−2.0
Conflict
Positive Interaction
I−I
I−S
S−S
Couple Attachment Classification